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ABSTRACT

Social scientists have been studying marriage for several decades and have identified many factors related to the quality of marriage. A longitudinal study of 57 engaged couples was conducted while they were college students and after they were married to test parts of Lewis and Spainer's recently proposed theory of marital quality. It was hypothesized that three premarital variables (consensus on values and marital roles, emotional health, and exposure to adequate role models) and three marital variables (quality of role enactment, amount of companionship, and effectiveness of communication) would be directly and positively related to marital satisfaction. The findings showed that the premarital variables were the most important in their indirect effects on marital satisfaction. Effectiveness of communication was the most important marital variable in explaining both spouses' marital satisfaction. The results provide some corroborating evidence for the validity of Lewis and Spanier's theory and also provide evidence with which to refine, extend and modify the theory. (Author/JAC)

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THE EFFECTS OF PREMARITAL AND MARITAL FACTORS ON EARLY MARITAL SATISFACTION: AN EMPIRICAL TEST OF THEORY*

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THE EFFECTS OF PREMARITAL AND MARITAL FACTORS ON EARLY MARITAL SATISFACTION: AN EMPIRICAL TEST OF THEORY

Social scientists have been studying marriage intensely for several decades and have been able to identify many factors which are related to the quality of marriage. Lewis and Spanier (1979) recently surveyed several hundred of these studies, and from this review they proposed a theory of marital quality. Their middle-range theory organizes the findings under thirteen propositions and is clearly the most comprehensive and parsimonious attempt to date to organize the vast array of literature on factors affecting the quality of marriage.

This study attempted to test parts of Lewis and Spanier's basic propositions, and to extend and refine their theory. More specifically, one of the goals of this research was to further test the relationships three premarital and three marital variables have with marital quality. A further goal was to revise the theory in two ways. First, the Lewis and Spanier model does not deal with the possibility that while some of the variables may have a direct effect on marital quality, others may only have an indirect effect. In this study the possibility that the effects of the three premarital variables are mediated by the marital variables was investigated. Second, the Lewis and Spanier model does not provide the information with which to evaluate the relative strength of each variable. Therefore, the possibility that some of the premarital and marital variables would be more highly related to marital quality than others was examined.

THE THEORETICAL MODEL

The three premarital variables studied were premarital consensus on values and marital roles, emotional health, and exposure to adequate role models. These variables are indicators of all or parts of three of the four premarital factors put forth by Lewis and Spanier (1979:289).

Quality of role enactment, amount of companionship and effectiveness of communications were the three marital variables investigated. They were seen as indicators of Lewis and Spanier's more general variables role fit, amount of interaction, and effectiveness of communication (1979:289).[1]

Marital satisfaction was the dependent variable used in this study. It was seen as an indicator of Lewis and Spanier's more general concept, marital quality. There has been a great deal of debate about the term to use to describe the qualitative aspects of marriage; this study's dependent variable (Spanier and Cole, 1976; Spanier, 1976; Spanier, Lerner, and Aquillo, 1978; Lewis and Spanier, 1979; Rollins and Galligan, 1978; Burr, Leigh, Day, and Constantine, 1979; Edwards and Saunders, 1981). It is clear from a reading of the above references, that many of the conceptualization problems Lively (1969) mentioned over a decade ago are still not resolved. Since it was beyond the scope of this study to attempt to resolve this issue, a decision was made to use a subjective indication of marital quality--the amount of marital satisfaction.

In order to partially test the Lewis and Spanier model, it was proposed in this study's theoretical model that the three premarital and the three marital variables were all directly and positively related to marital satisfaction. The Lewis and Spanier model was

extended by positing several indirect relationships. First, it was hypothesized that adequacy of role models was indirectly related to marital satisfaction through the intervening variable, premarital emotional health. Lewis and Spanier (1979:277) anticipated that exposure to adequate role models would be indirectly related to marital quality: "it is quite likely that a number of intervening variables exist (between exposure to adequate role models and marital quality), which, if controlled, would better explain such an association." It seemed likely that one of these intervening variables could be the "premariatal resources" of the person. Because this study had data on the emotional health of the person, which Lewis and Spanier saw as a premarital resource, it could be determined whether there was a direct or an indirect relationship between exposure to adequate role models and marital satisfaction by determining whether emotional health was an intervening variable in that relationship.

Second, premarital consensus and emotional health were hypothesized to be indirectly related to marital satisfaction through each of the marital variables. Adequacy of role models was not hypothesized to be directly related to the marital independent variables because it was already seen as related to them through emotional health.

The most appropriate method of testing this model is with path analysis, therefore the model is presented as a path diagram in Figure 1. Since the wives' model was suspected to differ from the husbands, sex of respondent was seen as a contingency variable.

Figure 1 about here

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Lewis and Spanier's theory of marital quality has propositions that can be deduced from several different general theories. Lewis and Spanier move from their thirteen specific relationships to three more general relationships that are derived from social exchange theory (Lewis and Spanier, 1979:285). The relationships in this study are based on two of Lewis and Spanier's three general relationships and therefore the findings have implications for some of the ideas in exchange theory.

Burr, Leigh, Day and Constantine (1979:66) believe that Lewis and Spanier's theory can also be viewed as a part of symbolic interaction theory. They postulate that the better a person performs in his or her roles, the more satisfied he or she and his/her spouse will be in the marital relationship. Therefore, Lewis and Spanier's role fit variable is included in symbolic interaction theory. Mangus (1957) says much the same thing when he states that the integrative quality of the marriage is reflected in the degree to which a partner's role expectations are fulfilled or frustrated. Thus, the present study was also guided by symbolic interaction theory and the findings have implications for some of the ideas in that school of thought. Therefore, while not specifically designed to test a general theory of the family, the model of marital satisfaction tested here could add to our confidence in the utility of both social exchange and symbolic interaction theories.

METHODS

Design and Sample

Since this study investigated the effects of both premarital and marital variable on marital satisfaction, a longitudinal design was used. Premarital data were collected during 1979, and marital data were collected one year later during 1980. The subjects for this study were engaged couples who completed the premarital instrument in 1979 and who subsequently married each other. Those who broke their engagement or married someone other than the person with whom they had taken the premarital instrument were excluded from the sample.

About 1,000 students in several sections of a marriage course at a large private university completed the premarital instrument. Of these, 99 couples were engaged or seriously paired. Attempts were made to reach all the couples by means of former roommates, alumni records, university registration records, and the local telephone directory. Using these sources, the investigator was able to locate 57 couples who had married the person with whom they took the premarital instrument. Of the remaining couples, seven had terminated the relationship, two were still engaged, and thirty-three were unreachable. The marital data were collected by mailing questionnaires to both the husband and wife and requesting that they independently complete the questionnaire and return it by mail to the researcher. All 114 people (or 57 couples) returned the questionnaires. This unusually high return rate was probably due to the fact that $5.00 was offered to each couple who returned both questionnaires.

The sample was a rather homogenuous group. The mean age at marriage of the wives was 20.68 years and of the husbands was 22.42 years. The couples were engaged an average of 5.35 months with the range being from two months to 15 months. The average length of marriage at the time they completed the marital questionnaire was 9.80 months with the shortest marriage being four months and the longest 14 months. All the couples were white and had been married in a religious ceremony.

There are several reasons why it is defensible to use a small, fairly unique and homogeneous sample to test and revise the ideas in the Lewis and Spanier theory. A theory, to be useful and valid, should be made up of variables that are neither bound by time nor culture (Hage, 1972); and the goal of this study was to corroborate, refute, verify, refine, and/or modify a theory. If a theory is valid then even in a unique sample the relationships will tend to occur. This should be true whether the sample is made up of Jewish people, Blacks, lower class marriage or any other unique group. If the relationships do not hold up, this argues against the theory, or at least alerts the researcher to the possibility that there may be contingency variables affecting the hypothesized relationships. If the relationships are supported, this provides greater confidence in the theory. In sum, the sample used in this study is justified because the purpose is testing theory, not attempting to generalize to a specific population.

Measurement

The premarital variables were measured by means of the Marital Inventories for LDS Couples (MIL) (Yorgason, Burr, and Baker, 1979).

While the MIL as a whole has not yet been subjected to rigorous reliability and validity checks, the items on it seen as indicators of the premarital variables were taken largely from well known and highly reliable instruments (Holman, Burr, and Brown, 1979).

To help facilitate comparisons between studies the scales used to assess the various marital variables were taken from previous works. This study's companionship scale was used earlier by Orden and Bradburn (1968) and Miller (1976) to assess the relationship between companionship and aspects of marital quality. The communication scale was made up of the nineteen "best" items from Bienvenu's (1970) study of marital communication, and the role enactment items came from a questionnaire used extensively by Bahr (1980) and others.

Several possible scales were available to measure marital satisfaction. Bowerman's marital satisfaction questionnaire, which had been used successfully to test a theory of marital satisfaction before (Burr, 1967, 1971), seemed the most appropriate for this research.

Analytic Procedure

To test for an interaction by sex, the sample was divided into a husband sub-sample (N=57) and a wife sub-sample (N=57). Using path analytic techniques path coefficients were created for all the paths hypothesized in Figure 1. The model met all the requirements for path analysis (Schumm, et al., 1980) except for the ten to one ratio of subjects to independent variables. This study used 57 subjects in most of the analyses, using six independent variables. It was reasonsed that 57 was close enough to the minimum requirement of 60. The results given below report significance

levels as high as $p < .10$. Although it is common to use only the .05 and .01 levels, the researcher felt that because of the small N and because this study was testing some relationships which had not been tested before, it was important to also report the .10 level of significance.

RESULTS

While Lewis and Spanier's theory is presented as a multivariate model, the research upon which it is based is largely bivariate. Therefore a preliminary "check" of their model could be made by looking at the simple bivariate correlations. These are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

At the bivariate level, the husband's marital satisfaction is significantly and positively related to five of the six independent variables. The wives' marital satisfaction, however, was significantly related to only two of the variables--perceived premarital consensus ($p < .10$) and effectiveness of communication.

In order to extend Lewis and Spanier's theory, a multivariate test was performed to assess the possible indirect effects of some of the variables on marital satisfaction and to measure the relative strength of the variables.

Figure 2 gives the path coefficients for husbands and wives. The model reveals that effectiveness of communication was the only one of the six variables to have a significant direct effect on both husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction.

Figure 2 about here

However, several variables affected marital satisfaction indirectly. The paths between perceived consensus on values and marital roles, and two of the marital variables in the husbands' model -- companionship and communication -- were significant. For the wives, perceived consensus was also positively related to both companionship and communication, and premarital emotional health was positively related to communication. As hypothesized, the more adequate the men's role models, the greater their emotional health, however for the wives the adequacy of their role models was inversely related to their emotional health.[2]

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Implications of the Findings for Lewis and Spanier's Theory

The goal of this research was to gather information to further corroborate or refute, and also refine Lewis and Spanier's theory of marital quality. The results partially corroborate Lewis and Spanier's theory but some of them argue against it, and they also provide a basis for refining and extending the theory.

The marital independent variables. The most important piece of information gathered relating to the theory, is the singular importance of effective communication. For the wives' marital satisfaction, almost nothing else makes any difference. For the men, the other variables, especially companionship, retain some importance, but communication is still the dominant variable. This result confirms Synder's (1979) multivariate test in which communication variables are the most important predictors of marital satisfaction.

Taken together with earlier empirical findings and the experience of therapists, this result shows the overwhelming importance of married couples having or developing good communication. Thus, therapists and educators will want to emphasize improving factors like communication skills and not dwell on unchangeable premarital factors such as happiness of parent's marriage, etc.

Companionship is seen by Lewis and Spanier and others (e.g., Miller, 1976) as an important factor in explaining marital quality. However, it was not found to be an important factor in this study. The data here suggest that companionship has little or no effect on marital satisfaction. In the bivariate analysis companionship was highly related to marital satisfaction. However, in the multivariate analysis companionship's importance faded. Even when the communication variable was removed from the analysis, companionship was only marginally significantly related to satisfaction, although it was the strongest of the remaining variables.

Because these results contradict earlier findings such as Miller's (1976), it must be concluded that the importance of companionship to marital quality is not yet clear. Further research and reconceptualization seems in order.

The other marital independent variable in this study, quality of role enactment, had absolutely no impact on marital satisfaction when other factors were taken into account. Therefore, role enactment may not be as important as theorized by Lewis and Spanier or Burr et al. (1979:69). However, as with companionship, because of the richness of the theory supporting role enactment as an important variable, more work needs to be done to determine whether the findings

of this study are unique or if role enactment is not as important as thought.

The premarital independent variables. There are several conclusions about the premarital factors that are suggested by this study. At the most general level, one conclusion is that the premarital variables all have an indirect rather than a direct relationship with marital quality. Lewis and Spanier base their proposed direct relationships between premarital variables and marital quality on bivariate research. However, the path analysis used in this study shows the premarital variables' importance to be more in their indirect relationships to marital satisfaction. Therefore, based on this study, Lewis and Spanier's model should be revised to include indirect links between the premarital and marital variables and the direct links between premarital variables and marital quality should be dropped.[3]

A second point is that none of the relationships between the premarital variables and the marital variables are very strong. For this study's couples it appears that what went on premaritally is not nearly as important as the current effectiveness of communication in determining their satisfaction with the marriage. The one exception to the weak relationships is consensus's relationship to communication. Thus, of the premarital variables, consensus is the most effective in impacting marital satisfaction indirectly.

A third fact that should be noted about the premarital variables is the negative relationship between role models and emotional health for the wives. This unusual and unexpected finding

may have its explanation in the effect of different rates of social change. In more stable times with more continuity between generations, the stability of the parents' marriage was important (Burgess and Wallin, 1953); it may be less important now. Therefore the nature of society may be a contingent variable affecting the relationship between role models and the other premarital and marital variables. If that is the case family life educators will want to emphasize to unmarried people that the quality of their parents' marriage need not discourage them unduly from getting married and anticipating a successful marriage.

In summary, this study's findings corroborate parts of Lewis and Spanier's theory of marital quality and also provide evidence for revising and extending the theory by showing (a) that some factors, such as communication, are more important than others, and (b) that some factors, such as perceived consensus, are important in their indirect effects on marital quality, not their direct effects.

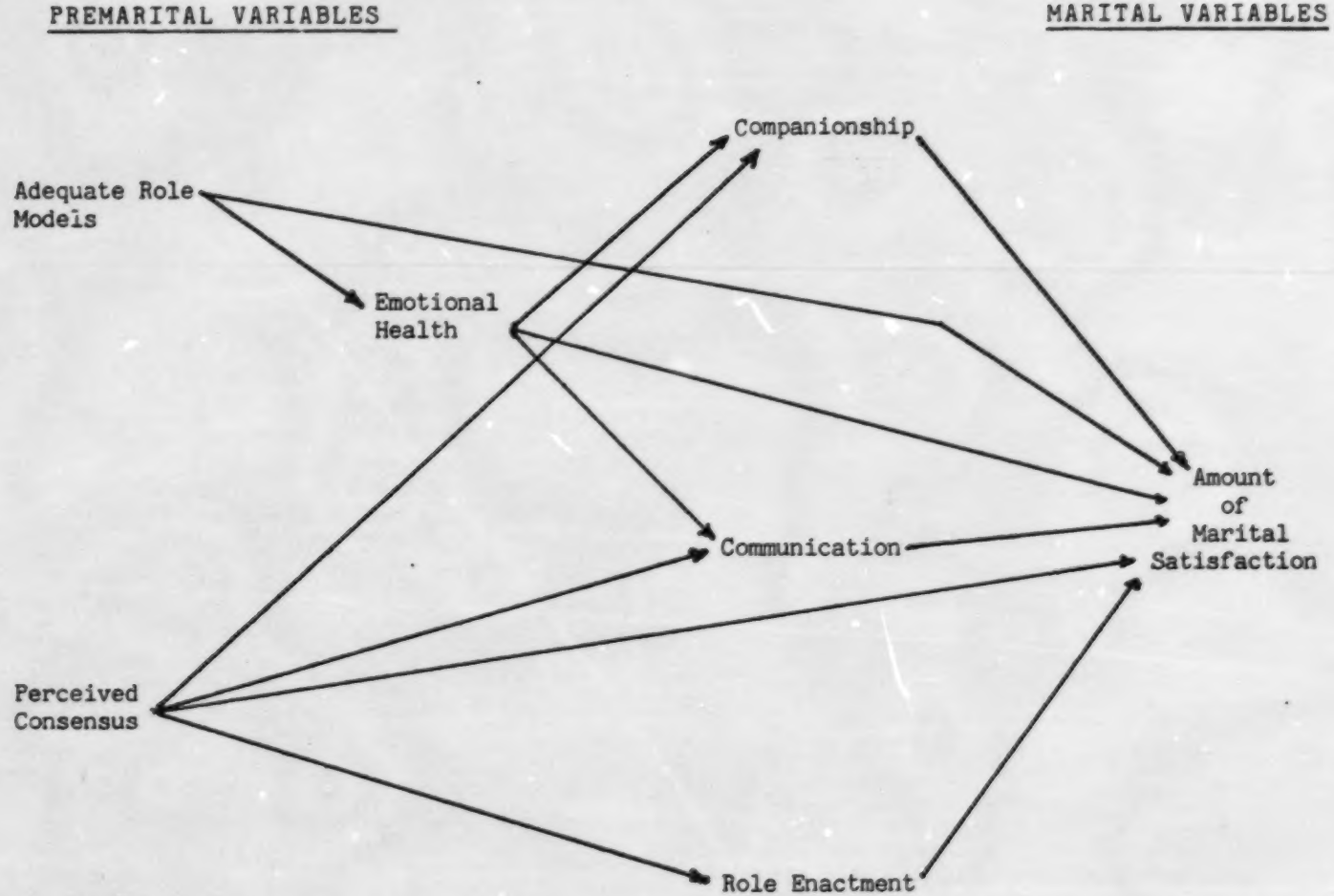

Figure 1: Hypothesized Path Model

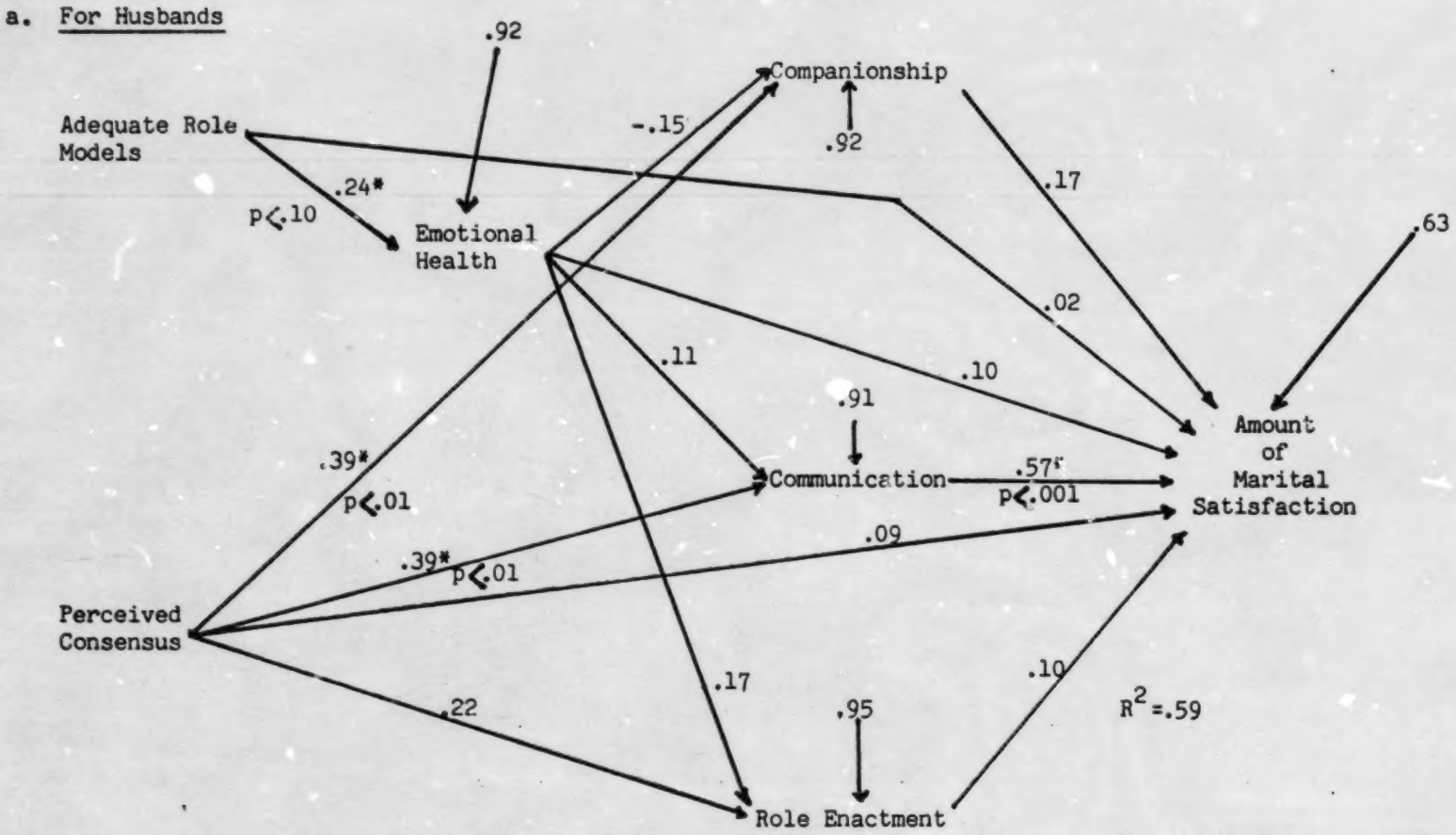

Figure 2: Path Coefficients for Husbands and Wives Path Model with Marital Satisfaction

b. For Wives

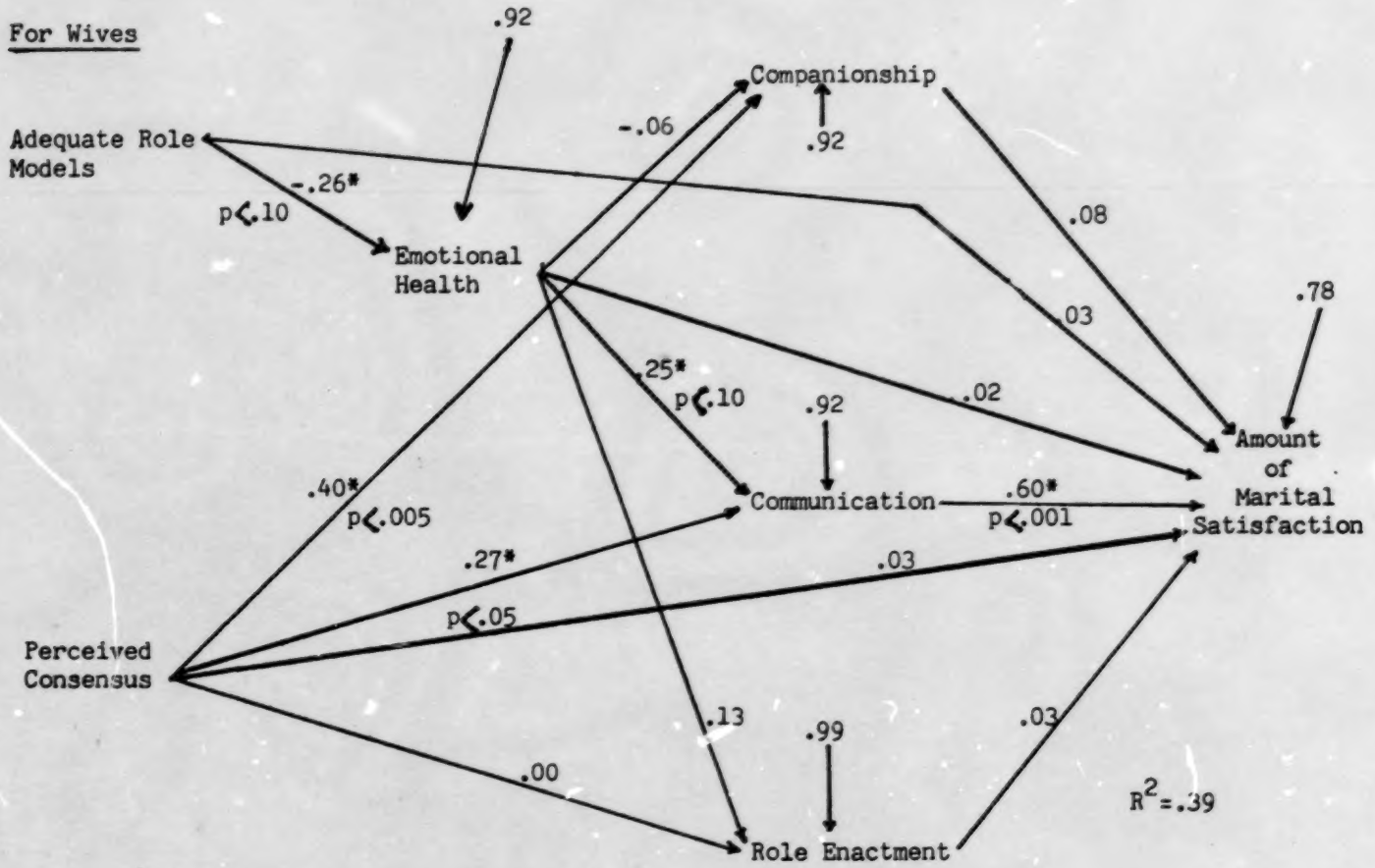

Figure 2: (continued)

TABLE 1

CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS OF PREMARITAL AND MARITAL VARIABLES FOR WIVES AND HUSBANDS[a]

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	Emotional Health		-.26**	.20	.02	.30*	.13	.20
2.	Role Models	(.24)*		-.09	.17	-.13	.04	.03
3.	Perceived Consensus	(.21)	(.21)		.39***	.31**	.03	.25*
4.	Companionship	(-.07)	(.13)	(.35)***		.16	-.11	.19
5.	Communication	(.20)	(.14)	(.41)*	(.51)***		-.10	.62***
6.	Role Enactment	(.22)*	(.12)	(.26)**	(.37)***	(.40)***		-.04
7.	Marital Satisfaction	(.23)*	(.17)	(.42)***	(.51)***	(.74)***	(.38)***	

[a]Husbands' coefficients are in parentheses.

*p<.10
**p<.05
***p<.001

FOOTNOTES

[1]Since Lewis and Spanier did a comprehensive review of the relevant literature and since the purpose of this study was to test and refine their theory, it did not seem necessary to include here a duplication of their review of the literature.

[2]This unexpected finding was checked by looking at the bivariate correlations between emotional health and five items which made up the role models scale. The females' emotional health was negatively correlated to all five items. The correlations were significant ($p < .10$) with "childhood attitude toward mother" and "childhood happiness", with "mother's marital happiness" approaching significance. For the men, all five correlations were in a positive direction with childhood happiness being the only one with a significant correlation ($p < .05$).

[3]These findings also have implications for recent theoretical works such as Edwards and Saunders model of the marital dissolution decision, which is based in part on Lewis and Spanier's model. The current study would argue for adding important marital variables to that model as intervening between advanced mate selection adjustment and marital congruity (see Edwards and Saunders, 1981:384).

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